

# Human Immunodeficiency Virus (HIV) Infection

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## **What is Human Immunodeficiency Virus (HIV) and how is it spread?**

HIV is the virus that causes the acquired immunodeficiency syndrome (AIDS). You can become infected with HIV by the exchange of blood, semen and vaginal secretions with a person infected with the virus, such as by having sex or sharing needles. Pregnant women infected with HIV can also pass the virus to their babies at birth or shortly after through their breast milk. HIV attacks our body's immune system so that we are less able to fight off germs and diseases.

## **What are the symptoms of HIV?**

On the average, for the first 7 to 10 years of HIV infection, there are **no symptoms**. When symptoms first appear, they will vary from person-to-person. Some of the symptoms that many people experience in early HIV disease are: night sweats, fever, extreme unexplained weight loss, persistent diarrhea, fatigue (tiredness), nausea, vomiting, swollen lymph glands, headaches, and persistent dry cough. The last stage of HIV disease is AIDS, in which many life-threatening infections can cause serious disability and/or death. There is no cure for HIV infection.

## **How soon after exposure do symptoms appear?**

HIV may cause symptoms any time from the time of infection up to 10 years later or even longer. This will vary from person to person. Many people confuse the length of time HIV takes before causing symptoms with the length of time it takes for the HIV antibody test to become positive which is 3-6 months after exposure.

## **How long can an infected person carry the virus?**

A person infected with the virus will carry it in varying amounts in the body for the rest of his/her life.

## **How do you test for HIV?**

The test for HIV is a blood test which determines if the body has had an immune response to the virus. It takes a while for the body to produce such a response. Three months after infection, the test is 90% accurate. After 6 months, the test is 95% accurate. If you feel that you have been exposed to the virus, you may consider getting an HIV test after 3 months. For peace of mind, you could have another test done in another 3 months. If you are constantly putting yourself at risk, having a test done every 6 months is recommended.

### **How is HIV infection treated?**

Quite often no treatment is needed in the early stages. However, there are now a number of drugs used to slow down the disease. When a person has AIDS, there are many drugs used to treat the various diseases that can invade the body. A person with HIV infection should talk to a doctor or other health care provider about treatment options.

### **How can HIV infection be prevented?**

Since the virus is passed ONLY through four body fluids, the best way to prevent HIV infection is to not come in contact with the blood, semen, vaginal fluids, or breast milk of an infected person. Abstinence (not having sex, not sharing needles) is the only 100% sure way to prevent infection. There is no vaccine to prevent HIV. If abstinence is not practiced, monogamy with a person who does not have HIV infection is the best way to avoid becoming infected. Monogamy means having a long term, faithful sexual relationship with one partner who is also faithful to you. After these two ways, safer sex is best. Safer sex means using a condom for anal, oral, or vaginal sex. If you share needles (for drugs, steroids, tattoos, or body piercing), clean your needles. If you are infected, notify your sex partners and needle sharing partners immediately so they can be tested.

IF YOU HAVE ANY OTHER QUESTIONS ON HIV/AIDS OR ANY SEXUALLY TRANSMITTED DISEASE, PLEASE CALL THE VIRGINIA STD/AIDS HOTLINE AT 1-800-533-4148.

